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ETHICAL VALUE OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS

BY MRS. M. BURTON WILLIAMSON.

Social organizations have their rise in the social instinct. And it will be my purpose this evening to sketch very briefly the origin and development of this instinct, as well as to prove the value of social organizations. By these terms I do not include the purely social clubs, the rendezvous for eating, smoking and lounging; nor any of the various secret societies. Strictly speaking, a social organization would not come under the classification of a club formed for philanthropy, reform, or study along social lines, although the social element is often so closely allied with clubs organized for work of some kind that a strict line of demarcation is difficult, unless the object of the club is kept in mind.

What is its object? Has a social organization any ethical value?

Before attempting to answer these questions it will be necessary to study the genesis of the social instinct and also the intellectual development that has given rise to social organizations. We know the social instinct is inherent and can be traced back through gradations of animal life. Not in the form which we mean when we allude to social feelings, but in the more primitive segregation of species into colonies, schools, flocks and herds of animals. In invertebrate life the gregarious masses are due to the immense quantities that are generated in certain localities, and these only represent a part of the germs that fail to survive. This gregariousness was illustrated in the little pelagic, microscopic peridinums which were so abundant on our coast at one time, summer before last. A vial filled with sea water was seen to be alive with peridinums. Not scattered in haphazard fashion in the vial, but these tiny brown specks were seen following each other in two moving streams, as a flock of birds flying, some leading, others following. We cannot, strictly speaking, call this a social instinct, yet in these gregarious masses we might see the germs of a more advanced segregation of animals. A tiny, one-celled animal cannot represent much more than a possibility. The social instinct to be recognized as such, must be evolved from a more complicated system

of nerve tissue than is found in any invertebrate represented by a jelly fish, or an oyster. But in an insect, a bird or an animal, scientists tell us the structural units or microscopical cells and fibers are more or less similar, and that "mind has a physical basis in the functions of the nervous system and that every mental process has a corresponding equivalent in some neural process."^{*} With the evolution of the nervous system the social instinct evolves.

Social instincts not only are shown in animals of the same genera and species, but animals both wild and domesticated have formed friendships. In domestic life the friendship of birds, cats, dogs and horses for their owners or keepers is of common occurrence. "Cats often like to associate with horses, and in some cases with dogs, birds and rats." Anecdotes of this social instinct are numerous. A pet minorca chicken raised by our family showed a decided preference for one member of the household. Dade knew his name and would run to his mistress whenever she called him. Often he would perch for the half hour on the arm of her chair if she were in the garden. For a short time he had two or three hens under his supervision. He always called them to eat first and would wait until they, the greedy ones, had satisfied themselves before he would swallow a mouthful, although he would pick up a grain of corn, then place it in front of a hen. In going into the chicken yard of evening it was always noticed that Dade called the hens, then when they were in front of the gate, he would stand on one side with as much grace as a cultured human, then pass in after the hens.

In Romanes' "Mental Evolution in Animals" he gives an illustration of a dog's attachment for his mistress. The anecdote was told by the author to show that dogs have an imagination, but it also adds another illustration of a dog's fondness for human society. "I have," he says, "known a case in which a terrier of my own household, on the sudden removal of his mistress, refused all food for a number of days, so that it was thought he must certainly die, and his life was only saved by forcing him to eat raw eggs. Yet all his surroundings remained unchanged, and every one was as kind to him as they always had been. And that the cause of his pining was wholly due to the absence of his beloved mistress was proved by the fact that he remained permanently outside of her bedroom door (although he knew that she was not inside), and could only be

*Romanes.

induced to go to sleep by giving him a dress of hers to sleep upon."

The author just quoted from not only enumerates the social feelings as one of the products of the emotional development of animal life, but he lists among the products of the intellectual development communication of ideas and what he calls "indefinite morality." That is, the morality that, in a psychogenetic scale, would be equal to an infant of 15 months. Under this category he lists dogs and anthropoid apes.

What is the impulse that has been the original source and stimulus of organic activity? The struggle for existence, or, in other words, the craving for food, the nutritive impulse. Evans says: "Every expression of feeling, every exercise of the will, every exhibition of intelligence in the lower animals and in man can be traced to hunger as its fountain head. From the pressure of hunger and the desire to prevent its occurrence spring the love of acquisition, the systematic accumulation of wealth, the idea of ownership in things, or the general conception of personal property, which is the strongest element of social and domestic life, codes of laws and system of morals, discoveries, inventions, industrial and commercial enterprises, scientific researches, and the highest achievement of culture and civilization."

He further says: "It is true that as man arises in the scale of intelligence, other and nobler incentives to activity come into operation and act even more powerfully than the primal nutritive impulse. The latter, however, always asserts and insists upon the priority of its claims, and not until these have been satisfied and the stress of hunger relieved, and in some way permanently guarded against, does the individual think of devoting his energies to higher pursuits."

This has been illustrated in the struggle for existence of pioneer life. Plowing, and hunting, for food, and a rude habitation, were necessities. From the rough cabin, or shack, to the palace, there is represented the evolution of man from primitive labor to that of large commercial and industrial enterprises where many men labor together in the interest of one man. He rears a palace to adequately meet his social requirements that must follow along the line and keep pace with his monetary interests. Society, in its restricted sense, could only be possible when the struggle for existence was not the dominant idea. The social code, the particular attention to forms and the frequent and punctilious occasions of social intercourse have no

meaning to the man who is daily haunted with the impulse of nutrition for himself and his family.

We have seen that with the social instinct inherent there must still be certain conditions to influence the growth and progress of social development.

It is my aim to show that social organizations are due to the growth of both mental and social development. Not either alone, but together. The intellectual modified and influenced by social customs and the social elevated by seeking pleasure in a more rational manner than mere recreation as an excuse for passing time. Living in a world of activity, yet trying to kill time. This is the abuse of the social instinct.

It may be urged that the intellectual status represents the highest intelligence, or capacity for the function of the intellect, then how can it be modified and influenced by society?

I would not be misunderstood; there is nothing that should be more valued than the intellect, the power to understand, but if the intellectual person fails to adjust himself to his social environment, if his own personality is at war with the social judgments of his times, his influence is circumscribed, his intellectual attainments are not valued. He must care for the rights and privileges of his fellow men.

Whatever faults or failings may be laid at the door of polite society, it, in its best sense, is polite, seeking for the happiness of individual members of it. In social relations the ethical must necessarily be the groundwork of such relationships. The "ought" and ought not of the individual in his relation to society is ever present. Without this regard for the happiness of others there could be no such thing as ethical culture, which is only another name for refined altruism. Take, for instance, a company of what we term ladies and gentlemen; what is their characteristic in their relation to others? Politeness. No one must be made unhappy; self must be secondary to the feelings of others, and although this is often abused into a form of untruth, known as "white lies" or "fibbing," the exaggeration often has its root in the desire to do, and say, things that give pleasure. Politeness is not only the *sesamé* to good society but is a strong factor in making life easier in every avenue of life.

A lady was once trying to give her little grandchild a lesson in politeness when the application of the lesson came home to her in a way she had not anticipated. "G——," said she to the child, who was visiting her, "if you want any one to do anything for you, you must be polite, you must say 'please.' " A

little while after that the child had made some paste in a tin-cup and was busy on the floor pasting bits of paper together. The grandmother after a while became tired of the litter and said: "G——, you have played with that paste long enough; take the cup out into the kitchen." The little five-year-old arose, straightened herself erect, and said with much indignation, "Where is your polite?"

James Mark Baldwin, in a study in social Psychology, entitled, "Social and Ethical Interpretations," lays much stress upon the ability of a person to conform to the social community. We know there must be variation if there is growth, but he says that, "The limits of individual variation must lie inside the possible attainment of the social heritage by each person. In the actual attainment of this ideal, any society finds itself embarrassed by refractory individuals."

He further says: "It is the duty of each individual to be born a man of social tendencies which his communal tradition makes him, then, as far as his variation goes, he is liable to be found wanting of them; if he persists in being born a different sort of a criminal before the bar of public conscience and law, and to be suppressed in an asylum or a reformatory, in Siberia or in the Potter's field."

This refers, of course, to society in general, not to social organizations, for in these there is a selection of the fittest, the unfit is seldom invited or is soon socially suppressed. Not of course by drastic measures such as general society advocates, but merely ignoring his personality—not rudely, but silently, yet none the less effectively. For social organizations must be composed, for the most part, of individuals whose judgments are in unison with the social judgments of the club. A man or woman to be eligible to membership must be a clubable person. By this is meant a person who respects the rights of others. One whose attitude is aggressive, who is unmindful of others' rights, would certainly be unsuitable to a social club.

Receptions to notable persons and monthly banquets or luncheons, or cosy teas, combine two inherent instincts in life. The instinct of nutrition, as has been said, is the first organic emotion, and it is still a dominant factor in friendly intercourse. Even the "Man of Sorrows" gathered his chosen twelve around the social board when he broke the bread and drank the fruit of the vine while he foretold the saddening future.

If social organizations have introduced more hospitable relations between the members than was practicable in a club formed

for work, they are also fine mediums for educating women towards greater simplicity in entertaining. This question cannot be discussed in society functions where discussion is strictly tabooed, but is a legitimate topic at the club, where anything that is carried to extreme may be criticised in a general way. Articles written upon such topics by persons who are conversant with social abuses have, and do, popularize simplicity and grace, rather than display that borders upon vulgarity. If there is one trait of character that is the ruling passion in America, not of women only, it is that of imitation. In business, if one man branches out in a new line, he runs the risk of becoming bankrupt by competition in this new line. Women imitate in dress, furnishings, and style of living and entertaining—with the desire, however, to do a little more, or add more elaborate features of display. The social instinct would impel the victim even to the verge of bankruptcy in money and nerve! Intellectual culture would seek the happy medium. The social club, in this respect, can be a potent factor.

In the intellectual activity of such a club, the discussion of topics of general interest covers a wide field. The best talent, both outside and inside of the club membership, is at its service. Specialists along various lines readily use their talents for the good of such a club.

This is, of itself, of great ethical value to the members. Science is presented in a popular form; philosophy is given in terms less didactic; the best fiction is reviewed; music is interpreted by professionals; art is made more realistic, and educational methods are presented. All this is inspiring, uplifting and helpful as social steps in the advance in life.

I would not be misunderstood—mental growth does not depend upon clubs, nor, we may say, colleges, alone. With books and free libraries for their dissemination, there is no lack of educational aids. But such clubs are useful to persons who are by nature students. When one reads and studies alone, he sees only one side of the author's meaning or intent. This may be correct, and yet it is helpful to learn how other minds receive the same information. Social expression of ideas is an adjunct to mental growth. Growth is an ethical factor. When we think of degeneration, we immediately form an image of something that has been dwarfed for want of nutrition. This argument also holds good in a study club, but in such a club the tendency is to specialize; consequently there is not so much diversity in the range of topics discussed before the same persons.

There is an inspiration in associating in club life with men and women who have a broader insight into life, a finer conception of relative values, a more comprehensive vision of humanity than one possesses.

The social club is a help in breaking down imaginary social boundaries.

Genius is often the child of penury, and brains have been rocked in a pine cradle. But when genius and brains come to the front, social distinctions vanish.

Social organizations for women are often connecting links between the mother and society. A club represents individual home factors, held together by a common interest, yet diversified by hereditary gifts and home environments. The social club supplies a human want in the life of the mother. She may have no time to study, with her young family clamoring for her attention; but she may possess her soul in peace for an occasional half day in the club. The club demands less of her than society would. It gives her ideal thinking for a time which is a refreshing change from purely domestic, economic details. Surely it needs no argument to prove that such a mother would be happier because of her glimpse of the world outside her narrow horizon; nor that her home would also be benefited. As happiness is the desideratum, if not the ultimatum, of human desires, any club that tends towards the happiness of its members and of society at large is of value.

The social organization is a medium through which reforms can be disseminated. For a progressive club must discuss some of the issues of the day. Clubs for philanthropy or reform have taken their rise from such a club. As an instance, some years ago a member of the Friday morning Club was in favor of having a cooking school for girls in one of our poorer districts. A graduate of a Boston cooking school was asked to present this subject to the club. The need of such a school was discussed, and the result was the formation—outside of the club—of such a school. Through the liberality of another member an industrial department was added, and the Stimson-Lafayette Industrial Association was incorporated, and is now in a flourishing condition.

While furnishing the impetus to organized activity, the ideal social club commits itself to no restricted line of labor. In this respect it shows its strength, for it is able to educate and send out workers in many lines. Its sympathies are as broad as human wants.

In such clubs there must be neutrality in religious beliefs, and, it naturally follows that this religious liberty cannot do otherwise than have a reflex influence in general society. Without the social elements in clubs and societies do you believe that the Jewish women of our country could have been recognized and given a place at the Jewish Congress during the World's Fair?

It was said that never before in the history of Judaism had a body of Jewish women come together for the purpose of presenting their views, nor for any purpose but that of charity or mutual aid; never in the representation of Judaism. The club formed for social improvement draws no line between Jew and Christian, Theosophist and Agnostic.

Is this too broad a platform? It may be for narrow sectarianism, but not for a belief in the brotherhood of man! Not for Christian ethics.

Social organizations, or clubs, are not usually organized for the good of the public, but for the pleasure of its individual members; but that does not invalidate the claim that such organizations are of ethical value.

In answer to a letter of inquiry regarding the Sunset Club, which meets once a month, Mr. Charles Dwight Willard says:

"Usually about forty attend. The papers are on all classes of subjects; and there is usually one principal paper, about twenty minutes' long, and two short ones of five minutes each, after which, in the discussion, five to twelve men usually participate. Literary topics are infrequent, and economics occur most often. I have generally found that sociological subjects are most satisfactory to the general club membership."

A club like the Sunset Club, composed of a number of representative men of the city, men who are identified with various lines of activity as doctors, lawyers, ministers, bankers, architects, authors, merchants and men in other special fields of industry, must tend towards the ethical growth of the individual members, and consequently influence society at large. If the tendency is to "broaden those who are participants in the discussions," then certainly the community is benefited. Public opinion is something that changes; it never remains the same. Every lecture, every public discussion, has some share in the growth of ideas. The masses are led by the few. The discussion of sociological subjects, questions that deal with the phenomena of society, of the right relations of man to man, which include questions of "rightness" and "oughtness," might not seem to the sixty members of any great benefit to persons outside of the club, but

no body of intellectual men could meet monthly to think and talk over topics that are bound up in society at large without, in some way, affecting the general public.

No life stands all alone, and it is the problem of social psychology to ascertain to what extent the development of the individual mind applies to the evolution of society and how far society influences the individual.

No thought is useful to society while it remains merely in the mind of the individual. Social organizations are excellent mediums for the expression of ideas. Thoughts must have publicity; they cannot have any general value until they find expression and are available; then they become alive, a part of the general mind. If social organizations, composed of men or women of intellectual abilities and culture, did nothing more than require that all members should be persons who are known for their moral character, persons whose influence is in an ethical direction, who would say that such a club was not of ethical value. In chemistry we know by analysis the character of any substance, and in the same way we judge of a society by its units, or individuals composing its membership. Moral growth must be greater when societies are composed of individuals who aim to act ethically, and who are indulging in ideal thinking. The moral nature develops when the individual aspires to reach, in himself, an ideal status. A combination of such individuals is the ideal social organization.